

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE A4NEW YORK TIMES
9 January 1985

FILE ONLY - 200

Gunmen Abduct American Priest in West Beirut

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Special to The New York Times

BEIRUT, Lebanon, Jan. 8 — An American Roman Catholic priest who heads a relief agency was kidnapped by gunmen this morning. He was the fifth American to disappear on the streets of West Beirut in 10 months.

Witnesses said about eight men brandishing automatic rifles grabbed the priest, Lawrence Martin Jenco of Joliet, Ill., from his car as he was being driven to his relief offices in the mostly Moslem and increasingly lawless western sector of the Lebanese capital.

Father Jenco, 50 years old, is a priest of the Servite order who has worked here about three months as director of the Catholic Relief Services operation in Beirut. The relief agency has been providing aid to war refugees and other victims of the decade of strife in this country.

Requires Heart Medication

Shaken workers at the relief agency's office refused today to speak to reporters. Local Arabic-language radio stations and the Catholic agency's headquarters in New York said tonight that the priest suffered from a heart condition and required special medication.

By nightfall, there was no indication of his whereabouts or of the identity of his abductors.

While Christians, led by Maronite Catholics, form one pole of the bitter divisions here, Catholic Relief Services had made a point of keeping its operation in West Beirut open and of helping Palestinian refugees after their camps were destroyed during the Israeli invasion of 1982.

Swiss Released Earlier

Father Jenco's abduction came less than 12 hours after a Swiss diplomat was released after being held for four days. The diplomat, Eric Wehrli, the acting chargé d'affaires, had been chased down by a carload of gunmen in West Beirut. He was freed Monday night in the offices of Nabih Berri, the leader of the Shiite Moslem Amal militia.

Amal officials said their militiamen had found the hideout where Mr. Wehrli was being held and had freed him as he was being put in a car to be

taken somewhere else. The Amal officials said his abductors fled when confronted by the militiamen.

The newspaper An Nahar reported this morning that Mr. Wehrli had been seized by members of the Atat family in retaliation for the arrest of one of their relatives, Hussein al-Atat, in Zurich last November.

The Zurich police said when he was arrested that Hussein al-Atat had explosives strapped on him and that he was on his way to Rome to help blow up the American Embassy there. Italian police subsequently arrested seven young Lebanese and charged them in connection with the purported plot.

Priest Seized in Morning

Father Jenco was seized about 7:30 this morning from the main Hamra Street shopping district. Witnesses said the gunmen blocked his car, pulled him out and forced him into another car. They then beat the priest's driver, Khaled Krounfol, a Moslem, and locked him into the trunk of the priest's car.

Then they raced off in the getaway car, firing wildly into the air to clear the way, witnesses said.

Three other Americans are known to have been kidnapped, each, like Father Jenco, as he was headed for work in the morning, and all are believed still being held. They are Jeremy Levin, the Middle East bureau chief of the Cable News Network, who disappeared on March 7, 1984; William Buckley, a political officer of the American Embassy, who was taken on March 16, and the Rev. Benjamin Weir, an elderly Presbyterian minister, who was seized on May 8.

Also, Peter Kilburn, 60, a librarian at the American University of Beirut, who is in poor health, has not been seen since Dec. 3 and is feared kidnapped. Friends say his cane and medicines were left in his apartment.

No Claims of Responsibility

No group has taken responsibility for kidnapping the Americans. However, they are widely believed to have been taken by a branch of the shadowy Islamic Holy War, the Shiite Moslem terrorist cells that asserted they bombed the American Embassy twice and the Marine garrison here.

There has been considerable speculation that the Americans are being held as hostages to exchange for the 17 men, mostly Shiites from Iraq, convicted in Kuwait for truck bomb attacks on the American and French Embassies on Dec. 12, 1983.

The series of attacks on Americans and others — the president of the American University, Malcolm Kerr, was slain in his office last February — and the mounting anarchy has driven most foreigners out of Beirut.

Meanwhile, the Lebanese Government managed, after months of argument, to send 200 paramilitary policemen about 10 miles south of Beirut today in the first stage of a long-heralded peace effort. The mission of the policemen of the Internal Security Forces to clear the way for the deployment of

troops to open the coastal highway to Israeli-occupied southern Lebanon, which has been blocked by feuding Druse and Christian militias.

Heart Ailment Adds to Concern

A spokesman at the Catholic Relief Services's New York headquarters said yesterday that the agency was particularly worried about Father Jenco because of his heart condition.

The spokesman, Beth Griffin, the agency's Communications Coordinator, said that medical tests on the priest were taken Monday and that results became available yesterday.

A mass was concelebrated yesterday morning at the agency's headquarters for Father Jenco and for his abductors, Miss Griffin said. The principal concelebrant was the Rev. Robert Charlebois, Senior Director of the Catholic Relief Services programs in Eurasia.

Father Jenco, who was assigned to the post in Beirut last September, had received no specific threats before the kidnapping, Miss Griffin said.

She described Father Jenco as "personable, level-headed and very intelligent" and said he had been chosen for the Lebanese office because of his experience in dealing with large numbers of displaced people in Thailand and for his work in Yemen.

Father Jenco heads a staff of 12 that includes another American citizen, a nun. The Catholic agency operates relief and rehabilitation projects all over Lebanon, providing direct assistance to individuals and to war-damaged institutions.

Catholic Relief Services is the overseas aid and development agency of the American Catholic community and provides humanitarian assistance to people in 70 countries.